

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: CONSTRUCTING THE NICARAGUAN ARMY

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**BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS:
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by

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ABSTRACT

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Established in 1979, the Nicaraguan Army is the youngest Army in the Americas. Its creation is a result of a 150-year struggle between internal Nicaraguan partisan politics (Scylla) and the influence of United States (U.S.) foreign policy and commercial interests (Charybdis). Like Homer's Odysseus, the Nicaraguan Army constantly struggles to maintain its course as an apolitical, professional military force as it steers clear of the hazards of partisan politics and imperious U.S. intrusion. For the first time in their history the Nicaraguan people have a national army that abides by the constitution and which furthers the democratic development of the republic. However, President Ortega's recent attempts to establish authoritarian rule in Nicaragua threaten this new instrument of national power. This SRP describes the political birth of this non-partisan Army and its continuing battle to professionalize, modernize and maintain its independence in the face of fierce domestic political struggles and the wrenching effects of U.S. foreign policy.

BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS: CONSTRUCTING THE NICARAGUAN ARMY

The history of Nicaraguan military institutions is marked by an almost 150-year effort by ruling regimes to subvert them into political instruments to enforce their will. The country's political leaders have often used their military organizations for personal or partisan benefit, stifling the development of the Nicaraguan state. Despite this bleak history, today's Nicaraguan Army has purposely avoided this pitfall through organizational design and the vision of the Army's senior leadership. The emergence of a professional, apolitical, national Army is a tribute to the general healing that transpired after a twenty-year period of revolution and counter revolution from 1972-1993. Despite being the youngest army in the Americas, by 1998 the new Nicaraguan Army quickly emerged as a highly professional and apolitical institution. In a country whose history reeks of political division and foreign intervention, Nicaragua's Army offers an excellent example of the military's proper role in a developing democratic nation.

The Nicaraguan Army comprises approximately 14,000 soldiers in a military structure that includes a small Air Force and Navy as subordinate elements of the Army. Regardless of its small size, the Nicaraguan people recognize the Army as their most professional and trusted national institution. In a poll conducted in 2008 by the consulting firm M and R, the Army enjoys the trust and confidence of 71.5% of the Nicaraguan people.¹ By contrast, they have less trust in the Catholic Church, the media, their political leaders and parties. This was not the first time the Army received this rating; it has consistently polled as one of the most trusted institutions of the state since 2005. Even with these positive ratings, the Army continually struggles to maintain institutional independence and to fend off partisan efforts to subvert it to politicization.

Despite this balancing act, the Nicaraguan Army lacks the defense budget to effectively transform itself and relies on foreign military support. It is equipped primarily with 1980s era Soviet Bloc materiel which is in desperate need of spare parts and replacement. It relies heavily on the United States armed forces for security assistance, but the United States offers only minimal backing. This lack of support has two principal causes: The first is the ebb and flow of U.S. government (USG) involvement in Nicaragua – a constant scenario of involvement and withdrawal. The second is a distorted view, still held by some USG officials that the Nicaraguan Army consists of a gang of “Communists and Sandinistas.” So many USG officials simply do not trust the Nicaraguan Army. This negative perception remains despite the Army’s renunciation of all political affiliations in 1991, when its leaders pledged loyalty to the Constitution and then demonstrated that fidelity during an attempted “political coup” against President Bolaños in 2005.

Many U.S. policy makers fail to grasp the significance of the Nicaraguan Army’s depoliticization; this is not a palace guard for the current ruling political party. When USG observers took a closer look at Nicaragua during the relief efforts after the massive impact of Hurricane Mitch in 1998, they began to acknowledge the quality of the Army and the need to support this fledgling democracy. Nevertheless, over the last ten years, USG support to Nicaragua and its Army has been minimal. While democracy and institutional development of Nicaragua’s government have not proceeded as U.S. policy makers had hoped for, the evolution of the Army has been extraordinary. Not just in words but in deeds, the Army has clearly demonstrated that it is worthy of U.S. support: The Nicaraguan Army deployed units to Iraq; it has also supported U.S. regional

counternarcotics operations and contributed to the Global War on Terror (GWOT). The USG should support this professional institution as one of Nicaragua's only remaining national-level bulwarks against divisive internal partisan politics. The importance of this cannot be overstated.

As this study will show, the USG has frequently intervened in Nicaraguan affairs at considerable cost in blood, treasure, and prestige. The cycle of U.S. intervention and abandonment must end; it should be replaced with a policy of consistent engagement and support for building democratic institutions in Nicaragua. Democracy develops slowly; it must be nurtured and sustained. USG policy makers need to take a long view towards the problems in Nicaragua and then provide enduring support for Nicaraguan democratic institutions, including the Army. A steady policy of security assistance support for the Army, including military education focused on junior and mid-level officers and equipment modernization, may prevent the USG from having to intervene in Nicaragua again.

An effective and enlightened long-term U.S. policy is especially important today as President Daniel Ortega moves towards establishing authoritarian rule. The USG should not allow the destruction of representative democracy and democratic institutions, as well as the societal progress made over almost twenty years in Nicaragua. An authoritarian regime in Nicaragua—allied with Venezuela, Bolivia and Cuba—will destabilize the region and may result in another USG intervention in response to the provocative policies espoused by these nations' leaders. However, USG policy makers should avoid a public confrontation with President Ortega and the perception of intervening in Nicaragua's internal affairs. Subtle, discrete diplomacy and flexible

economic pressures can achieve U.S. policy objectives of democratic development and institution-building without inflaming Nicaraguan national passions against “Yankee” meddling. U.S. diplomatic efforts should promote a third-country or regional approach towards Nicaraguan democratic development in an effort to unify democratic forces and foster democratic convergence over the long-term and cease such short-term goals as trying to influence the next election. Simultaneously, the U.S. should adopt a sustained foreign aid program for Nicaragua focusing on democratic institution-building and the Nicaraguan Army. A minimal investment now can prevent a return to the violence which characterized Nicaragua in the 1980s.

Some may ask why Nicaraguan affairs should matter to the United States. The answer is simple: Nicaragua matters because of its geographic location and proximity to the United States. Indeed, because of this proximity, the stability of all of Central America and Mexico is of extreme importance to the national security of the United States. Any destabilization in this region radiates outward towards the United States. The growth of illegal narcotics trafficking, transnational terrorism, increasing levels of illegal immigration, weapons trafficking, illegal armed groups operating in ungoverned areas, the movement of special interest individuals and the rise of international gangs are all areas of great concern to U.S. national security. Just in the matter of illegal narcotics trafficking, it is estimated that over 1400 metric tons are produced in Latin America. The great majority of this transits Central America and Mexico on its way to U.S. consumers. If these illegal trafficking routes can be utilized for drugs, they can also be used to smuggle Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). This poses a grave risk to U.S. national security and our allies in the region.² The stability of the Central American

region matters not only because of these dangers, but also because of the economic and cultural linkages that bind it with the United States. It is important to highlight the positive benefits of a stable Latin America: 40% of U.S. trade is conducted with nations in the Western Hemisphere; 50% of our oil imports come from this region. The U.S. shares values of democracy and human rights with our neighbors to the south. Additionally, the changing demographics in the U.S. also strengthen our cultural links as Hispanics are projected to provide 29% of the U.S. population by 2050.

This study describes the formation of the Nicaraguan Army and assesses the effect of politics upon its development. Additionally, it clearly portrays an Army in the midst of military transformation; the Nicaraguan Army supports USG initiatives and deserves robust military assistance through a long-term USG policy of support for democratic institutions. Finally, this study highlights recent political maneuvers by the Ortega government designed to erode democracy; they threaten the survival of a non-partisan Nicaraguan Army.

Historical Background of Nicaragua and its Army

The U.S. Chargé d’Affaires in Nicaragua, Peter Brennan declared in 2005 “that even Machiavelli could learn a thing or two from the study of Nicaraguan politics.” Brennan also asserted that politics is the most important facet of Nicaraguan daily life. A member of a wealthy Nicaraguan family confirmed this when he remarked that “Nicaraguans eat politics for breakfast, lunch and dinner.” Nicaraguan political life intrudes on all of its citizens and this is particularly welcomed by the elite families of the republic. Early on, Nicaragua divided itself into two political camps: the Liberal party based out of the city of Leon and the Conservative party based out of the city of

Granada. The Liberal party resembled European liberal political parties. This “liberal” designation should not be confused with the term “liberal” used in the context of current American politics. The history of Nicaragua is dominated by a constant battle for power between political parties. In recent times, after the emergence of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista National Liberation Front) or FSLN, a communist affiliated political party, the Liberal party has been pushed to the right in the political spectrum. The Conservative party has been largely absorbed into the Liberal party during this political realignment. Nevertheless, current political life in Nicaragua continues to be dominated by two political parties, just as when Nicaragua became an independent republic in 1838. This political infatuation inexorably altered the development of this young republic, its institutions and its Army.

Politically, “the United States Government found neither the Liberals nor the Conservatives more towards their liking.”³ Instead, the U.S. was concerned with its commercial interests which intensified with the discovery of gold in California in 1849 and the ensuing pressure to open an inter-oceanic transit route. While the U.S. advanced its economic interests in Nicaragua, the Liberals and Conservatives continued their quest for political power. This competition bore bitter fruit when the Liberal party solicited the services of American mercenary William Walker, who landed on the Nicaraguan coast in 1855 with fifty-eight men. Delivering on his promise to support the Liberals, he quickly defeated the Conservative “Army” and captured their stronghold in Granada. He then declared himself Commander of the Army and later President of Nicaragua. His reign lasted until 1857, when Nicaraguans uncharacteristically put partisan politics aside and unified against him. With the support

of a Central American army, the Nicaraguans defeated Walker and forced him from power. The tragic Walker experience marked the first of many subsequent interventions that made Nicaraguans suspicious of the U.S.

Following Walker's defeat, Nicaragua returned to relative peace. Throughout this time, armies existed in name; but their character was neither professional nor national. Political violence exploded again in 1893 when the Liberals gained power via a revolution in which General José Santos Zelaya played a major role. Upon becoming President, Zelaya established national institutions, infrastructure and a monetary system as the framework of a modern state. Zelaya also built the foundation of a modern Nicaraguan Army, but it was an army of the Liberal party and of Zelaya - not a national army. Zelaya's rule quickly became dictatorial; he told voters "you can vote for José, Santos or Zelaya."⁴ Zelaya's Liberal opponents then joined with Conservatives to revolt in 1909. The revolt received significant support from the USG, which sent 400 Marines to occupy the Atlantic port of Bluefields "to protect the lives and property of Americans."⁵ An additional force of 2,100 Marines arrived to fight the Liberal Army and provided internal security until the U.S. State Department found an "acceptable" President. This first major-level USG intervention lasted sixteen years and was "an ominous precedent for American Policy...whose goal was to teach them to elect good men."⁶

The Zelaya period is significant because the U.S. intervention hindered the development of the Nicaraguan Republic. According to political analyst James Mahoney, "Business interests from the United States followed on the heels of the U.S. invasion, ultimately establishing control over the key financial sectors of the Nicaraguan economy. The ultimate consequence was the liberal policy programs [of Zelaya] were

not fully implemented.”⁷ To further illustrate Mahoney’s point, during the period of 1853-1910, the USG conducted nine minor military interventions in Nicaragua under the auspices of “protecting American interests”.⁸

By 1925, the USG declared Nicaragua as “stable” and withdrew the Marines. Political warfare immediately broke out between the ruling Conservatives and the Liberals. As a result in 1926, President Coolidge dispatched another unit of U.S. Marines to this troubled country and directed future Secretary of State Henry Stimson to mediate the crisis. Stimson organized a political truce, brokered an agreement to hold elections and founded an apolitical military force, led by U.S. military officers, called the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard) or GN. For the next seven years, the U.S. Marines trained and professionalized the GN. Unfortunately while the Marines built an apolitical army, the senior officers in the GN were appointed by the Liberals and Conservatives, ensuring that the GN would be politicized as soon as the Marines left. One of these officers, Anastasio Somoza García, captivated USG officials in Managua. Meanwhile, the Marine officers and their GN soldiers developed close relationships, provided law and order over most of Nicaragua while fighting a dissident Liberal General named Augusto Sandino and his Liberal Army. “By 1928, the U.S. military force chasing Sandino grew to 3,700 marines, while five cruisers and 1,500 sailors patrolled the coasts.”⁹ In 1933, the majority of the U.S. Marines withdrew upon the successful conclusion of another election. Somoza García became leader of the GN and invited Sandino to Managua for peace talks in February 1934. After the talks, Somoza García deceived and killed Sandino, subverted the GN to his will and later became president. So during a second major-level U.S. intervention, the U.S. built another political army

that would serve the Somoza dictatorship and Nicaraguans grew more resentful of U.S. foreign policy.

For the next 45 years, members of the Somoza family ruled Nicaragua with USG support. The three Somoza regimes paid nominal attention to human rights and held periodic elections to maintain the fiction of representative democracy in Nicaragua. The Somoza family's ruling style was simple: "Maintain the support of the Guard, cultivate the Americans and co-opt important domestic power contenders."¹⁰ The Somozas ran Nicaragua like their personal fiefdom thereby alienating many groups in Nicaraguan society and providing fertile ground for dissidents. The U.S. supported the Somozas out of necessity. World War Two and the Cold War prompted the USG to seek and sustain supportive governments in Latin America and Nicaragua was a perfect surrogate. Under the Somozas, Nicaragua declared war on the Axis Powers, offered to send the GN to fight in Korea and allowed the CIA to use Nicaraguan territory to organize and train forces for the 1954 coup d'état in Guatemala and the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba. The Somozas also sent the GN to support the US intervention in the Dominican Republic in 1965. Reciprocally, the U.S. established a Military Mission in Nicaragua in 1954 which provided large amounts of equipment, advice and training to the GN to assist with modernization efforts. Over 4,255 members of the GN trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas in the Panama Canal Zone.¹¹ Despite these efforts to professionalize the force, the Somozas managed to ensure that the GN remained a political Army loyal to their family. This civil-military arrangement was remarkably similar to that of Zelaya's partisan army.

Dissent grew under the rule of the Somoza dynasty. Several opposition groups formed, including the FSLN. The FSLN, also known as Sandinistas, were a small group of Nicaraguan Communists formed with the assistance of Fidel Castro in 1961. It originated an armed insurgency in the northern highlands of Nicaragua and was mostly unsuccessful in its battles against Somoza's GN. Despite the FSLN insurgency and other domestic opposition groups, the Somoza family maintained control over Nicaragua. However, their rule began to crumble in the wake of a massive earthquake which leveled Managua in 1972. In the aftermath of the earthquake, the GN quickly disintegrated as a professional military force and began looting businesses.¹² Subsequently, Somoza Debayle and the GN redirected arriving foreign disaster supplies and sold the goods on the black market. In doing so, Somoza Debayle and the GN lost any remaining legitimacy in the eyes of the Nicaraguan people. The FSLN then grew in strength and capitalized on the increasing national discontent following the earthquake. It built a broad-based coalition of opposition groups including labor, elites, landowners and the middle class – all opposed to Somoza Debayle. As the sole armed group within this broad front (*Frente Amplio*), the FSLN seized the leadership role of the national rebellion and planned a strategy to garner attention to their cause. The FSLN then conducted a series of dramatic attacks against Somoza Debayle designed to awaken the Nicaraguan people. According to retired General Humberto Ortega, "In 1974 the FSLN leadership met in Havana to plan a spectacular operation"¹³ – to assault the home of one of Somoza Debayle's Ministers and kidnap U.S. Ambassador Turner Shelton. Although the FSLN just missed Shelton, the successful attack and Somoza Debayle's

subsequent acquiescence to FSLN demands unveiled the weakness of his regime and enhanced the prestige of the FSLN.

Immediately afterward, Somoza Debayle ordered the GN to conduct a nationwide counter-insurgency campaign to eliminate the FSLN and its supporters. From 1975-1978, the GN conducted a brutally successful campaign that crippled the FSLN. However, their use of torture, arbitrary imprisonment, killings, rape, and “disappearances” enraged Nicaraguans and the world. At the same time, Jimmy Carter won the U.S. presidency and quickly cut off U.S. military and political support of Somoza Debayle. Because Somoza Debayle did not seem to have an interest in co-opting domestic opposition as his father and brother had done, he had no base of support except the GN. So without USG support, Somoza Debayle was isolated both domestically and internationally. The FSLN recognized this weakness and struck back at his regime in 1978 by assaulting and kidnapping the entire Nicaraguan Assembly. Again, Somoza Debayle acquiesced to FSLN demands in order to free the hostages. This attack marked the beginning of an FSLN-led nationwide uprising against Somoza Debayle, which ended in July 1979 with Somoza Debayle’s departure and the disintegration of the GN.

President Carter tried to engage the new Sandinista regime, but failed to win them over diplomatically. According to retired General Joaquín Cuadra, “There was no chance that the FSLN would trust the United States, because they had supported Somoza.”¹⁴ Somoza Debayle’s fall from power was soon followed by the electoral defeat of President Carter in 1980. In an effort to resist U.S. hemispheric hegemony, The FSLN sought an alliance with the Soviet Union and declared a Marxist-Leninist

revolutionary government in Nicaragua. These developments alarmed the newly elected U.S. President Ronald Reagan, who responded by initiating a foreign policy hostile to Communism in general and Nicaragua in particular. So the United States cut off loans and lines of credit to Nicaragua. Compounding these problems, the FSLN weakened their domestic support by purging political opposition groups favoring a Costa Rican-style democracy. So many Nicaraguan groups began to oppose the revolution. During these purges, two brothers who were FSLN leaders were able to consolidate power: Daniel Ortega secured political power, while his brother Humberto secured military power. Humberto Ortega commanded the newly formed - *Ejército Popular Sandinista* (Sandinista Popular Army) or EPS. The EPS was designed to be a political army to serve as the military arm of the FSLN. Its officers were highly politicized, so party membership was required for advancement. Furthermore, the FSLN embedded political officers within military formations to ensure the politicization of the soldiers and to maintain FSLN control.¹⁵ Thus the EPS became yet another Nicaraguan political army, based on a Soviet model.

Ortega's government imposed arbitrary domestic policies that angered Nicaraguans. In a particularly misguided attempt at agrarian reform, the Sandinistas began confiscating land and forced agrarian collectivization, which enraged small land owners (campesinos) in the north and central provinces. "Soon after the Revolution began, Sandinista security forces fanned out into the mountains where they quickly began seizing the campesinos' personal goods, and detaining, torturing, even killing, without trial, anyone who resisted."¹⁶ These campesinos joined with other groups of disaffected Nicaraguans and former members of the GN. Together, they formed the

nucleus of the Contra movement and organized small training camps in Honduras. The term Contra comes from the Spanish word *Contrarevolucionario*, or Counter-revolutionary. The Contras arose in reaction to the harsh imposition of the Sandinista revolution on Nicaraguan society – in particular, on rural society.

As the Ortegas took over, monopolizing power, the Revolution slowly lost its steam, its spark, its positive energy, to be replaced by an unprincipled, manipulative, and populist mentality...The Contra ranks were growing with the incorporation of more and more disgruntled campesinos, young people who refused to serve in the army and soldiers who defected. The upper classes, the businessmen who felt they had been marginalized, complained to the U.S. ambassador or abandoned the country entirely to join the directorates of the counterrevolutionary groups.¹⁷

As part of the Reagan Doctrine to contain Soviet expansion in the Third World, the USG began overtly supporting the Contras after discovering that Ortega was aiding Communist guerrillas in El Salvador. Despite U.S. attempts to negotiate, Ortega refused to stop his support for the guerrillas. Then, the U.S. initiated its third major-level intervention in Nicaragua, this time in the form of support for the Contra rebels. In order to combat the Contras and to counter the threat of a U.S. invasion, Humberto Ortega built the EPS into a modern Army using an estimated \$2.7 billion of Soviet military equipment, which included AK-47 rifles, attack helicopters, anti-aircraft missiles, T-55 tanks and tracked vehicles.¹⁸ Large numbers of EPS officers were trained in Cuba and the U.S.S.R. In 1980, “the Cubans established a military mission in Nicaragua which grew to comprise over 160 military advisors.”¹⁹ U.S. reports indicated that over 2,000 Cuban military and internal security advisors and another 75-100 Soviet advisors were located in Nicaragua.²⁰ Eventually, the EPS grew to almost 190,000 troops to combat 22,000 Contras and defend the country against a feared U.S. invasion. During the EPS build-up, the USG provided \$145 million of military and humanitarian aid to the Contras,

including \$48 million in covert assistance.²¹ The Reagan administration ended up investing an immense amount of political capital in a controversial policy which endangered his presidency in the wake of the Iran-Contra affair in 1986-7. Interestingly, the USG support of the Contras was remarkably similar to its attempts to destabilize the Zelaya regime 80 years earlier.

U.S. and Soviet Bloc support fueled a civil war in Nicaragua which resulted in over 50,000 dead. Families split along ideological lines – some supporting Contras, some supporting Sandinistas. Besides the devastating civil war, the Nicaraguan economy was crushed by economic failures, food rationing, diminishing Soviet support and the devastation caused by Hurricane Joan in 1988. Internally, the country was rife with political division and dissatisfaction, so the Sandinistas resorted to martial law. Externally, Nicaragua faced international diplomatic condemnation as a result of repressive FSLN domestic policies and human rights abuses. Despite all this, the EPS continued to grow, developing a professional fighting force by the late 1980s. Amazingly, while fighting the war, the Army grew in size, trained on new equipment, established doctrine and built new fighting units. Even so, EPS leaders grew weary of the war and dubious of their chances for victory.

During 1987, Contra forces infiltrated 12,000 troops and operated in 60% of Nicaraguan territory, establishing de-facto control over the north and central regions. They inflicted 2,039 casualties and shot down 20 EPS helicopters. To pay for the war, the Sandinistas printed money; the annual inflation rate was 1,800 percent.²²

Senior EPS leaders urged Daniel Ortega to seek peace, but Ortega wanted to negotiate from a position of strength. Accordingly, he ordered the EPS to launch Operation *Danto* in February 1988 to destroy Contra bases, disrupt Contra units and seize the initiative in the war. Advancing over fifteen miles into Honduras, the EPS destroyed several Contra

camps and then withdrew. The USG responded by deploying 3,500 troops from the 82nd Airborne Division, 7th Infantry Division (Light) and 193d Infantry Brigade (Light) to buttress the Honduran Army in Operation Golden Pheasant.²³ Shortly after, cease-fire talks began in the town of Sapoá.

In March 1988, the Sandinista and the political arm of the Contras - the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Democratic Force) or FDN - negotiated a peace plan and agreed to hold national elections in 1990. These negotiations were part of the larger Central American peace process championed by Nobel Peace Prize winner and Costa Rican President Oscar Arias. All Central American countries ratified this regional peace treaty in 1989. At the same time, President Bush succeeded President Reagan. His post-Cold War policies towards Nicaragua were more benign. The Nicaraguan people were tired of war, tried of shortages and tired of the Sandinistas. Oblivious to this reality, the FSLN was overconfident during the run-up to the 1990 presidential elections. In a surprise victory, the *Union de Oposicion Nicaragüense* (Nicaraguan Opposition Union) or UNO won the elections and Doña Violeta Chamorro took power in February 1990. This was the first legitimate and peaceful transition of power since 1889 – over one hundred years. “The final outcome was the result of a terrible and almost inexplicable miscalculation by the Sandinistas...had they believed they would lose a fair election...they would not have held it.”²⁴ Nevertheless, the EPS remained relatively well disciplined and did not try to annul the electoral results. Just after the electoral defeat of Daniel Ortega, the FSLN-dominated National Assembly passed a significant piece of legislation designed to protect the army: “Military Organization Law 75 established the President as Supreme Commander of the armed

forces, but delegated this office no specific powers over the Army. Control of the Army rested with the Army Commander-in-Chief and his military advisory council (*Consejo Militar*) composed of senior EPS officers.²⁵ Compounding Chamorro's problems, she assumed control of a state in complete disarray. The FSLN looted the entire government structure: It stole land, offices, houses, cars, even furniture and office machines in an event that became known as the *Piñata*. According to former U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua Paul Trivelli, "the state was bankrupt and Sandinista theft made it impossible to rule."²⁶ The USG provided some minimal assistance to Chamorro in a \$500M loan in 1990-1. But overall, "the Bush administration departed from any further involvement in Nicaraguan affairs with the same alacrity with which President Hoover sought the withdrawal of American marines after the 1932 elections."²⁷ The election of Chamorro thus concluded the third major-level U.S. intervention in Nicaragua and the end of Nicaraguan political armies. Henceforth, the Army would play a positive role in Nicaraguan society.

The Birth of the Nicaraguan Army

Among Chamorro's major challenges were; the economy (inflation reached 9,000 percent by the end of 1990), rampant poverty, disarming and reintegrating the Contras, determining the future of the EPS and General Ortega and winning USG support. General Ortega and the EPS leadership were in a difficult situation: They wanted to maintain the Army as an institution, but had to deal with the hostile Chamorro administration. They were also fearful of the U.S., which had recently invaded Panama in 1989. Many UNO supporters advised abolishing the EPS entirely and replacing it with a national para-military police force, as Costa Rica and Panama had done. General

Ortega and the EPS leaders were able to prevent dissolution of the Army partly due to the tremendous security challenges faced by in Nicaragua during the early 1990s. These challenges warranted the continuation of the EPS. During this time, the EPS faced internal tests that few were aware of: In the spring of 1990, the Chief of the Nicaraguan Air Force, Colonel Pichardo, led a small group of officers dissatisfied with the electoral defeat of the FSLN. They spoke openly of revolt and continued to transport weapons to FMLN guerrillas in El Salvador. They defied General Ortega in a coup to overthrow Chamorro. Moving quickly, General Ortega ordered Pichardo arrested and directed troops to seize the Air Force headquarters as well as outlying airbases before any pilots could take off to attack the presidential palace.²⁸

So Chamorro decided to keep the EPS, partly out of fear that any move to eliminate it would result in a coup by the Army.²⁹ Additionally, Chamorro saw the Army as a guarantor of national stability during the difficult transition period. However, in order to gain greater control of the Army and General Ortega, she reduced its size, abolished the draft, eliminated FSLN control of the Army and removed Cuban and Soviet advisors. As part of these institutional negotiations, the EPS resisted any attempt to integrate former Contra fighters into its ranks and Chamorro allowed Ortega to remain as Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Although Ortega had been a senior leader in the FSLN party, he proved to be an amazingly flexible officer as he adapted to the new political and world realities. Accordingly, Ortega swore a public oath of loyalty to Chamorro on January 10, 1991. Ortega pledged that “the Army would respect the Constitution and remain loyal to the President of the Republic, the Army would never be

oppressive, never use its arms against the people; and would never let any politician... cause disorder. The Army will not permit any further damage to the country."³⁰

Her choice to keep General Ortega and the EPS would prove to be one of Chamorro's most problematic decisions. The Bush administration and Republicans in the U.S. Congress, led by Senator Jesse Helms, disavowed Chamorro's decision to keep General Ortega and maintain the EPS. Chamorro further angered USG policy-makers by making peace with FSLN legislators and by her perceived failure to resolve U.S. citizens' property issues in Nicaragua. Many in the USG saw the Chamorro government as a coalition government, sharing rule with the Sandinistas. As a result, the USG suspended \$100M in badly needed economic aid to Nicaragua in 1992.³¹ USG pressure strengthened Chamorro's determination to eventually get rid of General Ortega, but this pressure also retarded democratic development in the fragile Nicaraguan Republic. The USG could have become a stabilizing factor in post-war Nicaragua, by providing appropriate economic and developmental aid, as it did in El Salvador and Panama after their conflicts. However, the USG's failure to recognize the political realities in Nicaragua and act positively exacerbated the on-going instability during the 1990s at a time when other Central American nations enjoyed record economic growth and healthy development of democratic institutions.

During this time, the biggest challenge the EPS faced was a massive reduction in force. The EPS dropped its strength from 190,000 troops in 1989 to 90,000 troops by 1991, with a further reduction to 34,000 by 1992.³² The reduction was a drastic and painful process – but it was necessary because the country could not fiscally support a large army. Most of the draftees went home and the Army forced over 5,000 officers to

resign or retire. All departing troops had to turn in their rifles, but that did little to change the reality of a country awash in weapons. As a result of the troop reductions, by the end of 1991 the EPS consisted almost entirely of officers and sergeants. Amazingly, this reduction took place in a completely orderly fashion. Many retiring officers were given land in lieu of cash. This would come back to haunt the Army because the granted land had been illegally seized by the Sandinistas during the 1980s. The dubious land titles thus guaranteed future conflict. The EPS also divested itself of military bases selling over 140 properties in an effort to pay the remaining soldiers and provide compensation for those leaving service. Excess military hardware was sold off to other Latin American nations, providing both pension funding for officers and essential operational funding for the army during the early 1990s. Throughout this transition, those remaining in the EPS did a great service to the nation by helping to disarm dissident groups and by maintaining security and civil order.

Many political scores were settled during this time. Families who had lost farms to Sandinista collectivization returned with Contra fighters to retake their land by force. In retaliation, Sandinistas killed opposition leaders. Notably, Colonel Enrique Bermúdez, the military leader of the Contras, was killed by Sandinista assassins because they feared his popularity.³³ Although Chamorro promoted national reconciliation, her government could do little to stop this cycle of revenge. Many Contras had no faith in Chamorro's Conservative Party government and their power sharing arrangement with the FSLN. In fact, the political elites in her government, who had done none of the fighting, disdained the Contras, calling them peasants and Indians. This dislike was mutual, so many distrustful Contras kept their arms. Additionally, many Contras who

had laid down their arms grew frustrated with unfulfilled promises of land grants and financial aid and took up arms again and began to conduct robberies and kidnappings in the north and central regions of Nicaragua. Together, these groups became known as Recontras. Throughout the disarmament process, the EPS was careful, respectful and humane in its dealings with the Contras, working for the Contras to reconcile and reintegrate into Nicaraguan civil life. However, as groups of Recontras rearmed, the EPS was forced to act against them.

Simultaneously, groups of discharged EPS soldiers, also unhappy with the peace process and their perceived lack of fair compensation upon leaving the Army, took up arms as well; they became known as Recompas. So the transition process was demonstrably violent: “Nationwide from Sep 1991 to December 1992...490 people were killed in political violence...204 were ex-contras or Recontras...57 were killed in combat with the army and 39 were killed in combat with Recompas.”³⁴ One of these Recompa units actually assaulted and seized the entire city of Estelí in 1993. General Ortega responded by ordering a mechanized brigade to attack Estelí from the south, while infiltrating special operations units into the city and ordering other EPS units to attack from the north. Many EPS officers were unsure of victory and uncertain that the soldiers would fire upon their former comrades. Despite these reservations, the attacks were successful: Estelí was liberated at the cost of 37 dead Recompas. General Ortega’s actions enraged the FSLN, but garnered the gratitude of the President and the nation. Through this single operation, General Ortega demonstrated that the Army was no longer a political tool of the FSLN.

Ortega and EPS leaders realized that to save the Army as an institution they had to cut off all ties to the FSLN. So they began dismantling the FSLN political infrastructure in the Army in 1992. All officers were forbidden to be members of a political party; all political propaganda was forbidden within military units; and all political officers were removed from the ranks. According to Ortega, this depoliticization was not an easy task:

Many people who are Sandinistas cannot comprehend how men identified with *Sandinismo* can perform their duties and act professionally when their deeds conflict with party interests. This has not been easy within the Army, which is composed of former Sandinistas, but constitutional order obliges us to conduct ourselves in function of the interests of the Army and the nation and not with those of the party.³⁵

To illustrate how intertwined the FSLN and the EPS were, in the 1990 national legislature, 22 of the FSLN deputies were EPS officers.³⁶ General Ortega believed that it was his duty to establish an institutional national army as one of the primary pillars of a democratic nation.

Therefore, in addition to purging political influences from the Army, he also established the Nicaraguan Military Academy to train future generations of military officers, regardless of their background or familial political ties. He saw the process of professionalization as essential. Given the history of Nicaragua, he knew that this development would not be uncomplicated. Under Ortega, the Army crafted a military code in 1994 to formalize its role in society as a national, non-partisan, apolitical and professional institution of the Nicaraguan state.³⁷ The military code decreed the Army's primary loyalty to the Republic and the Constitution. It ordered a process for the formal transfer of military power and established a military hierarchy. It designated appropriate missions, roles, military specializations and career paths for officers. The Army then

began to reintegrate itself into Latin American Army fora. Ortega also tried to reach out to the U.S. Armed Forces and in 1992 went so far as to decorate the U.S. Defense Attaché, Lieutenant Colonel Quinn, with a prestigious EPS medal. This initiative enraged the FSLN. Ortega did this, in his own words, as a form of “*electroshock*” because he felt it was important that people understand the new realities.³⁸ Ortega recognized the fact of the new world order implicitly: Following the fall of the Soviet Union and without a viable military support structure, the only way the Army would survive was to reconstitute as an apolitical national army.

Despite these developments, during this era the U.S. remained leery of Nicaragua. USG officials felt that Chamorro was a puppet of the FSLN, especially since General Ortega remained as Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Chamorro and her cabinet wanted to get rid of Ortega, but they did not have the authority to do so under Military Organization Law 75. They also did not feel they were strong enough to force the issue and they were unsure as to the Army’s reaction. Throughout this period, Ortega hurt himself by frequently making statements to the press on non-military issues, so many viewed him as the last vestige of the Sandinista regime. Legislators in the National Assembly, notably Luís Humberto Guzmán, felt that “Ortega was not a conventional general typical of Latin-American armies and was instead an astute political leader dressed in a uniform.”³⁹ Many in the EPS also wanted to get rid of General Ortega because he was viewed as an obstacle to the legitimacy of the national army. Despite this, the EPS senior leaders would not tolerate a forced removal; they believed General Ortega should be allowed to depart with dignity. In spite of these obstacles, Chamorro forged ahead and publically announced the retirement of General

Ortega during the 1993 Army anniversary celebration to a shocked crowd of government officials, guests and EPS officers. According to the current Commander-in-Chief of the Nicaraguan Army, General Halleslevens, “if one officer would have gotten up in protest, the entire senior officer corps would have walked out, triggering a national crisis. As a tribute to their professionalism and loyalty to the state, no officer acted upon his emotions.”⁴⁰ In response to this move, the USG restored aid to Nicaragua and General Ortega departed gracefully. His tenure as Commander-in-Chief of the Army under President Chamorro was positive. He transformed the Army’s organizational character, eliminated FSLN influence and established the Army as a national institution; subordinate to the President and loyal to the Constitution.

Strengthening the Institution

The Military Code directs that the Army will nominate a candidate to the President to assume the role of Commander-in-Chief. The reality of the situation is that, while the President has the right of veto, the Nicaraguan Army decides who their Commander will be, not the President. Despite this undemocratic process, this practice serves the Army well by enabling it to insulate itself from the divisive politics of Nicaragua. General Ortega’s replacement was General Joaquín Cuadra Lacayo, who was selected by the Army *Consejo Militar*, which presented Cuadra’s name to Chamorro as a *fait accompli* and Chamorro accepted the Army’s choice. The selection of General Cuadra was astute: He comes from an elite, wealthy, politically connected family. He earned revolutionary credentials as a former FSLN guerrilla and served as the Army Chief of Staff during the 1980s-90s. Furthermore, General Cuadra and President Chamorro are related by blood. They established a harmonious working

relationship and Cuadra wisely kept the Army out of Nicaraguan political life while maintaining a low public profile. General Cuadra began his tenure in 1995 with two immediate acts: First, he formally changed the Army's name to the *Ejército de Nicaragua* (Army of Nicaragua) or EN. This significant act formalized the Army's apolitical stance enacted several years previously. Second, he transformed the organizational structure of the EN, changing it from a Soviet-style mechanized force to a lighter and more agile army that can take on more diverse missions, such as civic action. This further strengthened the importance of the Army to the Republic. The changes that took place under Cuadra did not escape the notice of policymakers in Washington, who were "surprised that the Army could transform itself so quickly and efficiently."⁴¹

In 1996, Dr. Arnoldo Aléman was elected President of Nicaragua; he defeated Daniel Ortega, the FSLN candidate. Aléman was the leader of the center-right Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), which largely absorbed the Conservative Party. His election vindicated the Contra movement when he appointed numerous senior Contra leaders to his government and ended the period of co-rule with the Sandinistas. The FSLN did not like Aléman and devised a plan to assassinate him. The Army intelligence service discovered the plot and warned the FSLN not to attempt it.⁴² Facing overt EN opposition, the FSLN quickly shelved the plot, which remained a secret. Aléman's tenure marked a period of increased defense spending and generally good relations between the EN and the President during a period of on-going political turmoil. The first political crisis of Aléman's term was a nation-wide transportation strike and related student demonstrations organized by the FSLN. Aléman wanted the EN to move into

the streets and break the strike, but General Cuadra refused because he did not want to see the EN reenacting the repressive measures of Somoza's National Guard. He did not want to employ the EN against the people, because—like the U.S. Army—the Nicaraguan Army is not a tool of the elites, it is an army of the people.⁴³ Aléman then pressured Cuadra: "What good is the Army if I can't use it?" Cuadra quickly responded, "You're not Somoza and we're not the National Guard." Cuadra then asserted that the EN serves the nation and divulged the foiled attempt by the FSLN to assassinate Aléman. Cuadra declared, "That's why there's an Army and that's what it does."⁴⁴ The EN's actions in support of and in defiance of Aléman were further evidence of their apolitical stance and their focus on defending the Constitution – not the current political regime.

However, President Aléman did not give up. He tried to strengthen his control over the EN by re-establishing the position of Minister of Defense (MOD) in 1998. USG policy for military assistance posits the need for civilian control over the military. Aléman used this democratic principle to strengthen his hold over the military and subvert it to his partisan agenda. Interestingly, Aléman did not want a strong MOD who could challenge him; he therefore never resourced the MOD with sufficient personnel or resources. On paper, under Law 290 of the Nicaraguan Republic, Aléman gave the MOD the power to supervise the armed forces, yet in practice the MOD was "a minor post in his cabinet."⁴⁵ Instead he wanted a subservient MOD who would allow him to directly control the EN. The Army did not openly oppose the creation of the MOD; such overt opposition would have been publically and politically unsupportable. Nevertheless, the EN senior leaders recognized Aléman's intent and countered his move. Through

skillful use of allies in the National Assembly, they kept MOD power to a minimum, maintained control over their budget, kept the MOD out of operational and planning decision-making, and maintained a direct line of communication to the President, thereby bypassing the MOD in the chain of command. The EN leaders publically declared that they were serving the President, not the MOD.⁴⁶

In the midst of resisting Aléman's efforts to subvert the EN, a devastating category-five Hurricane Mitch struck Nicaragua in 1998. Weeks of heavy rains caused severe flooding and landslides that destroyed much of the infrastructure in the north and east of the country. President Clinton responded to Aléman's request for assistance by swiftly dispatching food, medical aid, and a U.S. military humanitarian task force to assist Nicaraguan civilian and military authorities. The ensuing military-to-military interaction marked a sea change in Nicaraguan-U.S. military relations. For the first time in twenty years, U.S. and Nicaraguan soldiers worked side by side. Subsequently, General Cuadra met with General Pace of U.S. Southern Command and Roger Noriega of the U.S. State Department in an effort to normalize military relations. These efforts were well-received by the Clinton administration, which was more amenable to and less suspicious of the Nicaraguan government. Formalization of military ties subsequently took several years; it included Nicaragua's participation in the Inter-American Defense Board, an exchange of military attachés, and the 2001 re-opening of the U.S. Military Group in Nicaragua, which had been closed since 1979.

The next crisis between Aléman and the EN occurred in 2000, when Cuadra's five-year term as Commander-in-Chief of the Army expired. In accordance with the Military Code, the EN *Consejo Militar* chose Cuadra's replacement – General Javier

Carrión McDonough. President Aléman tried to veto this nomination because he wanted to hand-pick the Commander. Aléman planned to use this leverage over the Army Commander-in-Chief and co-opt him as he had done with so many political figures in the legislature and the judiciary. Cuadra and the senior Army leadership saw through this scheme and rebuffed Aléman. They refused to allow the Army they had built to be subverted by another Nicaraguan President.⁴⁷ The EN leadership knew Aléman was a corrupt politician and warned him not to force the issue. In the end, Aléman acquiesced and Carrión was sworn in as Commander-in-Chief in February 2000. General Cuadra's five-year tenure as Commander-in-Chief of the Army was thus a complete success. During his term, Cuadra established new roles and missions for the EN, including removal of 65% of the mines planted during the Contra War. Cuadra forcefully resisted the political subversion of the EN, further cemented the institutionalism of the Army, and re-established military relations with the U.S. Armed Forces.

The Path of Professionalization

General Carrión proved to be another wise choice by the EN senior leadership. Carrión continued the work of his predecessors and maintained their shared strategic vision for the Army. A pragmatic officer, he quickly embarked on a program of convergence with the U.S. Armed Forces. He transformed EN doctrine and realigned it with U.S. military doctrine. He also worked with USG officials and members of the Center for Hemispheric Defense Studies to draft a national defense strategy or "White Paper" that was published in 2005. Additionally, General Carrión continued the process of transformation in the EN. According to General Halleslevens, EN transformation is based on four basic premises:

1) Professionalization; a strengthening process. 2) Institutionalization... continuing to “polish the crystal”, a process that ensures the Army marches in the same direction. 3) Credibility...There can be only one Army point of view that does not change regardless of which officer you are talking to. 4) Modernization...the Army must outfit itself with new equipment, new doctrine, additions to the military code, new training and new skills such as human rights, foreign languages and advanced civilian education.⁴⁸

General Carrión also clashed with President Aléman during a banking crisis which threatened the military officer pension fund. Aléman cultivated the crisis to damage FSLN banking interests, but he did not consider the ramifications to the banks' other clients, one of which was the EN. General Carrión responded professionally and warned Aléman to desist because his actions were contrary to Nicaraguan law. Aléman backed down because he realized that his actions were politically unsustainable.⁴⁹

In 2001, two events took place that had a tremendous impact on the EN: The 9/11 attacks and the election of President Bolaños. After Bolaños took power in 2002, he charged former President Aléman with corruption. Aléman's trial and subsequent conviction for theft and corruption completely polarized the country and split the PLC. These political divisions would plague Bolaños for the rest of his presidency, and threatened to engulf the EN in this political struggle. In the middle of this familiar political strife, the USG formally asked friendly nations to join the “Coalition of the Willing” and participate militarily in Operation Iraqi Freedom. President Bolaños was supportive, and was barely able to garner support in the National Assembly to deploy a Nicaraguan contingent to Iraq. However, General Carrión was reluctant to support the mission. Perhaps he foresaw the dangers of the deployment, and had doubts about the ambiguous mission of the EN in Iraq. Likewise he was uncomfortable about sending Nicaraguan troops as “invaders” against the people of Iraq. Accordingly, Carrión

deployed only a mixed unit of medical personnel and military engineers for a medical and de-mining mission. His influence on the composition of this force was consistent with the vision that the EN would be for the people and not against them. The EN contingent deployed in the summer of 2003 and spent over six months in Iraq before withdrawing due to the financial burdens of supporting the operation. All told, approximately 140 EN personnel deployed in the first overseas deployment of Nicaraguan soldiers since the 1965 mission in the Dominican Republic. As a reward for its support in Iraq, the USG provided the EN with \$3 million via the foreign military financing program to equip a counter-terrorist unit.⁵⁰

Second-and third-order effects from the “War on Terror” also impacted Nicaragua. The USG goal to strengthen civil air security struck the EN in an unexpected fashion. The EN has Man Portable Air Defense Systems (MANPADS) in its equipment inventory. MANPADS are ground-to-air missiles designed to provide air defense by downing enemy aircraft. The USG viewed MANPADS as a threat to civil aviation. Across the world, the USG exerted pressure to destroy or secure stocks of MANPADS in military arsenals to ensure that they would not fall into the hands of terrorist groups. Policy makers in the USG did not trust the EN’s control over their stocks of MANPADS. All told, the EN possessed over 2,000 Soviet-made MANPADS, to include SA-7s, SA14s, and SA 16s, all of which dated back to the Contra War of the 1980s. President Bolaños agreed to cooperate with the USG and ordered the EN to begin destroying Nicaragua’s MANPADS. During 2004, the EN destroyed 1,000 of these missiles with the assistance of the U.S. Armed Forces. The remaining 1,051 missiles – consisting of the most modern and lethal types – were stored in a USG built, state-of-the-art storage

facility. Despite this compliance with USG policy, from 2005-2007 the USG continued to exert tremendous pressure on Nicaragua for the complete destruction of its MANPAD inventory. Although President Bolaños supported this goal, his enemies in the legislature were determined to thwart him. They publically opposed further destruction, citing the threat from the Honduran Air Force and a lack of USG *quid pro quo*. However, their resistance was also politically motivated. They wanted to embarrass President Bolaños. Throughout this controversy, the EN remained out of the fray, assuming the position that they would obey the orders of the President and the National Assembly. However, they also advised the government to maintain 400 of the most capable missiles for national defense purposes. Many believed that the EN would have supported destruction of all the missiles if the USG offered a “carrot” in the form of significant military assistance, but the USG refused to offer anything. In the midst of the missile destruction negotiations in early 2005, the Nicaraguan Police seized a SA-7 missile purportedly for sale. But this missile was inoperable and was not an EN missile. In spite of this, USG policy makers seized upon this as “evidence” that the EN was engaged in weapons trafficking and quickly cut off military assistance.

This was the second time USG policy makers wrongly accused the EN of weapons trafficking. The first incident took place in 2002, when the EN sold the Panamanian Police Force small arms and ammunition that were then diverted to illegally armed groups in Colombia. In this case, the USG backed off their allegations when the EN displayed an End User Certificate for the small arms sale to the Panamanians. Together, these two incidents reveal a tendency among USG policy

makers to distrust the EN. Fortunately, this distrust remains in the realm of politics and is not shared by most senior leaders in the U.S. Armed Forces.

General Carrión finished his tenure as Commander-in-Chief shortly after the missile incident. His substantial accomplishments included significant improvements in EN training and readiness, the Iraq deployment, the Defense White Paper, the destruction of some MANPADS, and Nicaraguan participation in regional army forums such as the Central American Armed Forces Conference or CFAC. General Carrión followed the example of General Cuadra and maintained a discreet presence in national public life, which enhanced the EN's professional image among Nicaraguans.

Consolidation of the Army's Role in the Republic

Once again, the EN senior military council presented the President with their selection of Commander-in-Chief of the Army – General Moisés Omar Halleslevens Acevedo. President Bolaños accepted this choice, probably because he realized it was a good one. Halleslevens had served in many positions, including Chief of the Navy, Chief of Intelligence, and Chief of Staff of the Army. Halleslevens assumed command in a period when USG military assistance had been cut off and intense partisan political infighting was causing a crisis in governance. This latest round of political turmoil emerged from a political alliance between the FSLN and the PLC against President Bolaños; this alliance was known as “The Pact” or “*El pacto*”. Basically, it split political control of the country between two parties, the FSLN (controlled by Daniel Ortega) and the PLC (controlled by Arnoldo Aléman). In reality, “*El pacto*” is a familiar political maneuver to divide power between two political strongmen or *Caudillos*. “The Pact” carved up the legislature, judiciary, and important state institutions between the two

parties, effectively weakening Bolaños' ability to govern. During the summer of 2005, the crisis became so intense that the FSLN asked the EN to support the overthrow of President Bolaños. Still loyal to the Constitution, the EN refused. Then the crisis slowly receded. Soon afterwards, information emerged which contradicted the EN's alleged missile sale. When policy makers in Washington learned of these two events, the USG re-established military assistance to Nicaragua in October 2005.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the damage to military relations was done. It would take another three years of intense military cooperation to repair the loss of trust.

The USG continued to pressure the Bolaños government to restore to their rightful owners properties that had been seized during "*La Piñata*" at the end of the Sandinista period. The most contentious property cases involved approximately 140 properties controlled by the EN. Every year the U.S. State Department must certify (under Section 527 of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act) that the Nicaraguan government is making progress towards resolving these lingering property claims as a pre-condition for continued U.S. government assistance. Complicating this process is the fact that many claimants have already been compensated by the Nicaraguan government, yet they continue to press their claims through the U.S. embassy.

Confronted with Nicaraguan political strife and USG pressures, General Halleslevens focused his efforts on improving the EN's humanitarian assistance operations and established a joint rapid response force in 2005. He also began work to refine the military training and education system and embarked on construction and rehabilitation of military facilities to improve the living and working conditions on military installations. The EN also continued to strengthen professionalism among its soldiers,

primarily through its officer, cadet, and non-commissioned officer training programs. To reinforce this effort, the senior EN leaders address all newly commissioned officers to promote the Army values of; Duty, Country, Loyalty, Legality and Institutionality, (which in Spanish means the process of strengthening the organization). The Chief of Staff of the Army declared that, "The EN will not hesitate for one moment to remove any officer who brings shame on the institution...the Army will not tolerate criminal behavior nor cover it up...they will not permit corruption nor human rights abuses."⁵² The Army Counter Intelligence Branch investigates all allegations of corruption and treason. This vigilance serves to keep soldiers in line and goes as far as to instruct military personnel on whom to associate with and what outside activities to participate in.⁵³

Additionally, despite the meager defense budget, General Halleslevens furthered military equipment modernization to counter such new threats as drug trafficking and terrorism. This initiative responds to a real threat to Nicaraguan national security, the growth of narco-terrorist groups. During 2006-2007, the EN conducted a series of operations against Mexico's Sinaloa cartel infrastructure in Nicaragua. The EN seized 3 aircraft and 13 boats; it destroyed landing strips and confiscated weapons; it seized \$2M in cash and over 2 tons of cocaine, all belonging to the cartel.⁵⁴ General Halleslevens also strengthened EN units assigned to Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast in an attempt to provide security for an under-governed area threatened by Colombian narco-terrorist groups. Additionally, the EN and MOD successfully collaborated on hosting the 7th Defense Ministerial of the Americas conference, held in Managua in September 2006. This interesting event featured some contentious participants, including the embattled U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and his adversarial Venezuelan

counterpart, General Baudel.⁵⁵ Throughout this period, the Nicaraguan and U.S. Armed Forces moved to restore a working relationship that focused on areas of mutual concern – counter narcotics, counter terrorism, humanitarian assistance, and peacekeeping operations.

In November 2006, Daniel Ortega finally succeeded in his bid to reclaim the presidency in Nicaragua. He won the election with 38% of the vote, largely due to the enduring split in the Liberal party (PLC). In the run-up to the elections, the EN discretely warned all political candidates not to cause problems by organizing violent demonstrations. Privately, the USG did not desire Ortega to win election because of the history of his past rule in Nicaragua, but their mediation could not restore the unity of the PLC. Publically, the USG policy was to support a free and fair election in Nicaragua.⁵⁶ After Ortega's election, the USG embarked on a pragmatic policy of constructive engagement with his government and an on-going security assistance commitment to the EN.⁵⁷ This policy paid dividends in continued cooperation on counter narcotics operations. Then in September 2007, a category-five Hurricane Felix slammed into Nicaragua's Atlantic Coast; the USG responded rapidly. The U.S. Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance provided humanitarian supplies, and the U.S. military mounted relief efforts. The U.S. was the first nation to provide aid, and it provided the most aid, totaling over \$15 million in direct aid and \$30 million in relief support (including military airlift, re-construction, medical and civil affairs support). Ortega, always a pragmatist, accepted the USG aid with good grace and appeared in a series of memorable photos with U.S. soldiers, perhaps symbolizing a change in bilateral relations.

The Future of the Nicaraguan Army

The Nicaraguan Army currently comprises 14,000 personnel, with the Air Force and Navy as subordinate elements. The EN depends considerably on support from the USG; but because significant support has not been forthcoming, the EN seeks military assistance from any donor nation. U.S. policy makers should not construe this as a rebuff; rather it is evidence of the EN's urgent modernization needs, especially for equipment. Spain, France, Taiwan, Russia and the U.S. currently offer military assistance. The EN receives training support from these nations, as well as from other Central American nations and Chile. Venezuela and Iran have indicated an inclination to cooperate, but to date this cooperation has not materialized. Since 2004, the USG annually provides approximately \$500K in military training assistance and \$600K in military equipment through its security assistance program. Other sources of USG military assistance include several million dollars in counter-terrorism training and equipment and civil-defense humanitarian assistance. Throughout this time, the Nicaraguan defense budget has remained relatively static: In 2002 the budget was \$33 million and in 2007 the budget reached only \$38 million. Nicaragua's is the lowest per capita defense spending in Central America.⁵⁸ Clearly, the Republic benefits immensely from this small investment: It fields a trained and ready Army that can defend national territory, that is proficient in disaster response and humanitarian assistance missions, that is qualified to provide support for law enforcement duties, that is skilled in supporting natural resource conservation efforts, and that can confront narcotics trafficking organizations and terrorists.

In 2009, an important change will take place within the ranks of the Nicaraguan Army. The *fundadores* or founders of the EN will reach 30 years of active service and

must retire. So, the leadership of the EN will turn over completely. Former FSLN guerillas will be replaced by a new generation of officers who came of age on the battlefields of the 1980s against the Contras. The *fundadores* will probably continue to constitute the triumvirate of the Commander, Chief of Staff, and Inspector General. However, a younger generation of officers will take over major unit commands, the joint staff, and military support forces. Overall, this new generation received much formalized military training from Cuba, the U.S.S.R., France, Spain and the United States. In fact, many officers in the ranks of lieutenant to major have attended some form of U.S. military training. To further illustrate recent changes, in 2006 the first two Nicaraguan Army cadets in over 30 years were accepted into West Point's class of 2010.

Admiral James Stavridis, the Commander of United States Southern Command, and General Halleslevens both believe that military-to-military relations are strong but can be strengthened further. There is significant cooperation on such mutual security threats as; narcotics trafficking cartels, illegal armed groups, weapons trafficking, terrorism, migrant trafficking, and other regional security challenges. To strengthen this relationship, General Halleslevens stressed that USG policy makers must understand that the EN is a national army, respectful of the constitution and free from political influences.⁵⁹ EN Chief of Staff Major General Avilés also mentioned that USG officials need to take President Ortega's anti-imperialist rhetoric with a grain of salt: "The President's comments do not change the relationship between our armed forces."⁶⁰

In 2008, General Halleslevens remarked that "politics has become a disease in Nicaragua."⁶¹ Thus he acknowledges the eroding effect of political infighting on Nicaraguan society and government institutions. What fortifies the EN senior leadership

against this cancer is their shared background as FSLN guerrillas and soldiers during the Contra war. Accordingly, the EN thinks and acts with one voice, always guided by the firm hand of the Commander-in-Chief and supported by the *Consejo Militar*. The EN is an incredibly coherent and disciplined organization; it tolerates no corruption or institutional disloyalty. Despite the EN's unity and demonstrated loyalty to the Constitution, some USG agencies continue to mistrust the Army. As early as 1992, the Nicaraguan legislator and writer Luís Humberto Guzmán noted this phenomenon: "The attitude of the Department of State and the Pentagon towards the EPS are different. It is a situation where, paradoxically, the Pentagon has the more benign attitude, while the State Department continues expressing a profound lack of confidence with the leadership of the EPS."⁶²

Despite the EN's significant progress and some democratic development within the Nicaraguan Republic, domestic politics are still dominated by Arnoldo Aléman and Daniel Ortega – two corrupt, patrimonial, political rivals. The seemingly endless battle for political power in Nicaragua impoverishes the state. Constant political maneuvering does nothing to address the glaring social problems and rampant poverty in Nicaragua, which threaten national stability. As political fortunes rise and fall, the government undergoes constant change. Positions in government ministries are given out as political patronage and the resulting institutional weakness undermines significant democratic development and institution-building.

Additionally, economic growth in Nicaragua has stalled due to the global economic crisis, a decrease in investment and rising wages, food prices, and energy costs. Inflation now exceeds 20%, remittances from the U.S. have declined and double-

digit unemployment persists.⁶³ President Ortega rejects the liberal economic model of the United States and proclaims socialism as the only way to reduce Nicaragua's economic problems. Ortega has allied himself with President Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and embraced his socialist economic model. Ortega has joined Nicaragua in the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA). He has also initiated Citizens Power Councils (CPCs) in neighborhoods across Nicaragua as an institutional "block watch" of the FSLN in order to control and inform on the people in local neighborhoods while rewarding FLSN loyalists with food subsidies. Ortega decreed the institution of the CPCs despite the Nicaraguan legislature's vote against their establishment, which is contrary to Nicaraguan law.⁶⁴ Despite these actions and his rhetoric, Ortega maintains the underpinnings of a market-based economy and Nicaragua remains part of CAFTA (Central American Free Trade Act). Ortega's seemingly contradictory political and economic policies appear to be pragmatic. He may be adeptly utilizing the proceeds from both the USG and Venezuela to advance Nicaraguan development and his own political survival. However, this political dance is not without its dangers. In 2008, Chavez pressured Ortega to join in the ALBA defense pact against "imperialist aggressors," i.e. the United States. This move caught the EN off guard, while they were collaborating with the U.S. Southern Command on peacekeeping initiatives.

President Ortega attempts to subvert the integrity of the EN through promises of military equipment from Iran, Venezuela, and Russia. For example, President Ortega recognized the Russian Republic of South Ossetia in October 2008, largely with the expectation that Russia would reward Nicaragua with military hardware.⁶⁵ Ortega also diminishes the public standing of the EN and publicly embarrasses the Army's senior

leadership during public gatherings when he refers to the Army's past history as the EPS, the military arm of the FSLN. However Ortega's greatest threat to the EN comes from embroiling them in political-military controversies. These controversies are particularly damaging to the public perception of the EN's non-partisanship.⁶⁶ Two recent examples are noteworthy: In May 2008, President Ortega offered political asylum in Nicaragua for two *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarios Colombianos*, (Colombian Revolutionary Armed Forces) or FARC terrorists. In his role as Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces, President Ortega ordered the EN to provide an aircraft to transport the two terrorists from Ecuador to Nicaragua.⁶⁷ Next, in the fall of 2008, President Ortega invited surface elements of the Russian Navy to visit Nicaragua in December 2008. He authorized this visit by Presidential Decree, without seeking the approval of the National Legislature, as required by the Constitution. These maneuvers put the EN in a difficult situation politically. By law, they must obey the orders of the President. However, President Ortega often operates on the margins of constitutional law.⁶⁸ Thus far, General Halleslevens has countered Ortega's efforts to subvert the Army, but his tenure as Commander-in-Chief ends in February 2010.

Nicaragua faces an uncertain future. Its constant political battles hamper Nicaraguan democratic development. President Ortega's moves to consolidate political power continue unabated and threaten democratic institutions. He manipulates the legislature and judiciary and outlaws opposition groups and political parties. Additionally, Ortega orchestrates FSLN political violence as a tactic to intimidate the opposition.⁶⁹ Ortega likewise ordered criminal investigations of his political opponents, domestic critics, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to silence

his detractors.⁷⁰ He is rapidly becoming a despotic ruler. In fact, President Ortega probably took advantage of the current global economic crisis to commit electoral fraud and ensure FSLN victory in the November 2008 municipal elections. In the run-up to the elections, the Ortega government limited the Constitutional rights of free speech and peaceful assembly. Ortega blocked the OAS, the European Union (EU), and the Carter Center from observing the balloting.⁷¹ In the aftermath of the 2008 election, it became clear to domestic and international groups that Ortega and the FSLN conducted widespread voter fraud in order to win, with irregularities occurring in over one-third of the polling stations. In fact, uncounted ballots were found in the municipal dumps in Leon and Managua.⁷² Ortega's appointments to the Supreme Electoral Council rubberstamped the electoral results, giving the FSLN control of 105 out of 146 municipalities in Nicaragua.⁷³ Opposition groups took to the streets to protest the electoral fraud but were met with FSLN-orchestrated mobs which fought them in the streets of Leon and Managua resulting in four deaths and numerous injuries.

Meanwhile, the Sandinista-inclined National Police looked on. The OAS, the EU, the Catholic Church, and the USG have all urged Nicaragua to conduct a recount.⁷⁴ In the aftermath of the elections, Nicaragua's Ambassador to the OAS accused that organization and the USG of interfering in Nicaragua's internal affairs. In response to Ortega's apparent electoral fraud, the EU and the USG cut developmental and economic aid programs to Nicaragua.⁷⁵ Ambassador John J. Danilovich, chief of the USG Millennium Challenge Corporation, which provides grant aid to Nicaragua to fight poverty and build infrastructure, stated that the aid was cut because "Nicaragua had failed to meet standards of political freedom."⁷⁶ Thus far, the USG has wisely refused to

cut off the meager military aid to the EN, but Ambassador Callahan publically stated that “the USG reserves the right to review the future level of aid programs to Nicaragua.”⁷⁷

Ortega is clearly attempting future consolidation of his political power and he has received \$50 million in support from Venezuela to make it happen.⁷⁸ To solidify authoritarian rule, a despot must control three essential institutions: The army, the police or security forces, and the ruling party. The FSLN is firmly under Ortega’s control. The CPCs further the party’s control over the people. FSLN legislators in the National Assembly along with party loyalists in the Supreme Electoral Council and judiciary, also strengthen the power of the party within the state. The National Police have also been subverted by President Ortega. This is evident in their refusal to stop FSLN-orchestrated political violence against opposition groups, the media, and NGOs. Furthermore, Ortega manipulates the National Police hierarchy by removing senior officers who oppose the politicization and subversion of the institution. Then he replaces them with compliant officers who are loyal to Ortega and the FSLN.⁷⁹ Thus far, the EN has largely resisted President Ortega’s attempts at politicization. In effect, the EN is the sole remaining obstacle towards Ortega’s establishment of authoritarian rule in Nicaragua. Upon the retirement of General Halleslevens in 2010, Ortega will have an opportunity to influence the selection of his successor. It seems clear now that the USG policy of “free and fair elections” during the 2005 Presidential campaign in Nicaragua was a short-term policy which did not fully consider the dangers of the return of Daniel Ortega to power.

Recommendations

The USG should closely monitor the developments in Nicaragua. USG policy makers should convene a policy coordination committee (PCC) meeting to recommend courses of action and USG policy to the deputy's committee (DC) and principal's committee (PC) regarding the on-going crisis in Nicaragua in order to craft an effective long-term policy. These recommendations should support the development of a coherent and flexible policy in response to the crisis in Nicaragua and the future of Nicaraguan democracy. This policy should utilize appropriate elements of U.S. national power in a positive fashion to build democratic institutions. This policy must examine potential scenarios evolving from the Nicaraguan crisis and the USG reaction to it. The USG should be particularly concerned with the EN's apolitical stance and the Nicaraguan Army's reaction to political developments as President Ortega moves towards authoritarian rule.

The EN requires USG support. The EN's senior leadership must be convinced that the USG will support it in the event that it must exercise its constitutional responsibilities to counter the establishment of an Ortega dictatorship. President Ortega will surely attempt to manipulate the EN by seeking to control their military relationships with other armed forces, to influence promotions of senior officers, to buy influence from key military leaders and to directly manage the military budget and foreign sources of security assistance. This kind of manipulation of the military was recently practiced by President Ortega's mentor, Hugo Chavez, in Venezuela. Accordingly, the USG must provide significant security assistance to the EN so that the Army can be confident of U.S. support and in its resistance to subversion and manipulation by President Ortega. This support should not be viewed as a corrupt bargain. Instead, USG policy makers

should appreciate the EN's small budget and its significant role in supporting a democratic Constitution. The USG professes support for the development of democratic institutions in both diplomatic language and national security documents. However, this rhetoric is often not matched with significant fiscal allocations for democratic institutions and for the civilian-run militaries, which enable democratic governments to survive and flourish. More than anything else, the USG must resist the temptation of cutting off security assistance to the EN, unless it has real evidence of egregious violations of military behavior. Cutting off security assistance will only punish the Army not President Ortega. In fact, it could further Ortega's efforts to subvert the Army. Pragmatic and discreet use of economic aid as a tool to influence democratic development and processes is a very effective tool for undermining Ortega's authoritarianism. USG policy makers need to develop a degree of trust in the EN and its loyalty to the Constitution. In its dealings with Nicaragua, the USG must speak with one voice: The confidence in the EN articulated by senior U.S. military leaders must be matched by leaders in the Department of State and other USG agencies.

Security assistance supports the development of democratic institutions. USG security assistance for the EN is not sufficient – it should be considerably increased. For example, the EN has not had its senior leaders attend any of the U.S. Armed Forces senior development courses, such as the U.S. Army War College, because of the prohibitive costs of these courses. The cost of a one-year War College course, with the associated language training, amounts to over \$100K. With a total annual international military education and training (IMET) budget of approximately \$500K, attendance at this course for one officer would require the cancellation of training for numerous other

EN officers in the U.S. How can the USG influence current and future senior leaders in the EN without investing in their professional development? If an increase in security assistance for development of senior Nicaraguan officers is not forthcoming, U.S. Southern Command should continue to focus on military education for junior and mid-level Nicaraguan Army officers.

The USG should not concern itself currently with civilian control over the EN. In fact, the weak MOD structure that Aléman created worked against the FSLN when they regained power in 2007. The FSLN MOD appointee is unable to impose party politics in the EN's organization or leadership. The EN's independence is clearly in the best interests of the country given the alternative of falling under the control of the *Caudillos*, either Ortega or Aléman. The USG should await Nicaraguan political developments and the results of the 2011 Nicaraguan presidential election before pushing this issue. In fact, the EN needs U.S. military and political support to ensure that President Ortega and the FSLN do not succeed in their attempts to subvert it. The Department of State's and Department of Defense's specific country strategies for Nicaragua need to reflect this and the intent to preserve the EN's non partisanship.

USG policy makers must view the situation in Nicaragua in the context of regional stability. They must not ignore the role of Venezuela in recent events in Nicaragua, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Colombia. After seven years of fixation on the Middle East, the USG must again focus on building relationships in the Western hemisphere. It is not enough to declare support for "free and fair elections" and then walk away. Instead, the USG must also nurture democratic development; especially in those countries currently at risk that do not have a history of stable democracy, like

Nicaragua. In order to break the paradigm of USG neglect, intrusion, and detachment from Nicaraguan affairs the USG should pursue a policy of continuous engagement designed to support the development of democratic institutions without giving the appearance of directly intervening in Nicaraguan affairs. USG policy makers should understand the historical context of our relationship with Nicaragua, and then take a long-term view of our commitment to this fragile republic and its nascent democratic institutions, including its Army. The USG can sustain a positive relationship with Nicaragua through diplomatic finesse and subtle economic pressures.

Conclusion

The danger of political and economic turmoil in Nicaragua is real. This danger extends to its Army. What will happen if President Ortega orders the EN into the streets to put down a strike or political protest? Will they obey? Will Ortega succeed in his attempts to subvert the apolitical stance of the EN? Will the new generation of Army officers be able to resist Ortega's efforts at politicization? Or will they be more susceptible than their predecessors? If the Army revolts, will the USG support it against a democratically elected President Ortega? These questions reveal potential scenarios that could unfold; USG policy analysts should plan U.S. responses to such scenarios. Unfortunately, despite evidence of Ortega's electoral fraud and the grave situation in Nicaragua, the U.S. may well continue its benign neglect of this troubled neighbor. Historically, the USG acts only when it decides that it needs to intervene in a Nicaraguan "crisis"; these interventions are then followed by a hasty U.S. departure from Nicaraguan affairs. Therein lays the root of the problem: the constant cycle of U.S involvement (with an assortment of disparate policies), eventual military intervention,

and then the predictable departure from and indifference to Nicaraguan affairs. Since the birth of the Nicaraguan Republic, the USG has intervened militarily on 12 occasions. The Nicaraguans have almost come to expect our intervention in their affairs. Whenever a problem arises, they ask what the USG will do to fix it and seek regular consultations at the U.S. Embassy. Thus far, the USG has shown little interest in the current crisis in Nicaragua. It is ignoring the fundamental question: If Ortega's Marxist totalitarian regime was such a threat to regional stability in the 1980s, why is the USG unconcerned about his dismantling of Nicaraguan democracy now?

As President Daniel Ortega consolidates dictatorial powers and moves further towards autocratic rule, the USG cannot stand idly by and observe the destruction of democratic progress made over the past twenty years. An authoritarian regime in Nicaragua allied with Venezuela and Cuba will destabilize the Central American region and may lead to another costly U.S. intervention. Stability in Central America is essential to U.S. national security. A modest U.S. investment in democracy, economic development, and support for an institution like the Nicaraguan Army could preclude a return to the violence of the 1980s and a subsequent investment of national treasure to stabilize the region again. Instead, the USG must remain engaged and promote the advancement of democracy in Nicaragua. As a pillar in a democratic society, the apolitical EN needs USG support. The EN supports democratic government and enables it to flourish in the harsh, volatile political landscape of Nicaragua. The EN is the sole remaining national institution that Ortega does not control. President Ortega recognizes this and is beginning to subvert the Army's apolitical stance. The USG cannot allow this to happen. The EN has developed on its own accord into a national,

professional, and apolitical Army. It has proven itself during political strife. The EN is an Army of the people and for the people. It is an Army supportive of democracy, an Army loyal to the Constitution of the Nicaraguan Republic. It is a credit to the vision of its founders. However, the future of this national and apolitical Army may be in jeopardy.

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